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SUBJECT: GEORGIAN ELECTIONS: CAMPAIGNS SPAR OVER PROCESS IN
KUTAISI

Classified By: Ambassador John F. Tefft for reasons 1.4(b&d).

Comment

11. (C) During a December 19-20 pre-election visit to Kutaisi, Georgia's second largest city, we found opposition campaigns focused almost exclusively on alleged government plans to intimidate voters or to manipulate the results. Some of the charges contained credible-sounding details, especially those suggesting that activists for the ruling party had warned opposition supporters that they could face problems with their jobs or businesses. Many of the charges, however, seemed less credible, either because they were unspecific, seemed unlikely to effect the results even if true, or concerned things that had not yet happened, i.e., abuses that the opposition suspected the government was planning to commit. When the opposition did turn to the issues, it tended to favor process-oriented ones. For example, a local campaign official for Levan Gachechiladze said his candidate was winning support because of his call to abolish the position of elected president, adding that Gachechiladze was intentionally not emphasizing economic issues. Ruling party and government officials were more focused on promoting their record in improving Kutaisi's infrastructure, and their ambitious plans to develop Kutaisi as a tourism and conference center. We stressed to all parties that the government has a responsibility to ensure a free and fair election and, if international observers certify that this has happened, the losing parties have a responsibility to accept the results. All parties agreed in principle, but at the same time all seemed more focused on criticizing their opponents than on reining in their own supporters. End Summary.

Charges Range from Serious...

12. (C) Local representatives of all the major opposition candidates -- Gachechiladze, Gamkrelidze, Natelashvili, and Patarkatsishvili -- as well as the Georgian Young Lawyers Association (GYLA) provided us with a wide array of alleged government abuses that they said would, if not stopped immediately, make a free and fair election impossible. Many said their campaigns had encountered difficulty renting space. Gamkrelidze's local campaign chief Goga Asatiani said he had been unable to get city officials to allow him to rent the city's theater for a Gamkrelidze rally, until Gamkrelidze raised the issue himself with Acting President Nino Burjanadze (who represents a Kutaisi district in Parliament), and Burjanadze passed word through the regional governor to make the hall available. Asatiani gave several other examples with names included, including one village resident who had rented the campaign office space and then lost his job with the tax department. Gachechiladze managed to hold a rally in the Kutaisi theater December 19, but one Gachechiladze supporter told us the next day that the lights had gone out for 20 minutes during the rally -- something he

was certain was intentional.

13. (C) Asatiani provided names of Gamkrelidze supporters who had been harassed for signing petitions, in some cases by their own relatives who had themselves allegedly been threatened with trouble because of their family ties to Gamkrelidze supporters. Gachechiladze's local campaign manager said that someone he knew had forced him to resign from a lucrative state job, threatening him with such things as trumped-up drug charges or with the arrest of family member, after he appeared in a video clip of the opposition rally that ended in violence November 9. We raised such reports of intimidation in meetings with a range of local officials and the ruling National Movement's campaign. All dismissed the charges as exaggerated. Imereti Regional Governor Akaki Bobokhidze noted that the wife of a leading official of the Patarkatsishvili campaign was a member of his staff and would remain there. National Movement campaign manager Gocha Tevdoradze said the possibility of such actions could be completely "excluded," arguing that the National Movement did not need to intimidate voters to win.

...To Curious and Conspiratorial

14. (C) Other opposition complaints tended to raise more questions than answers, for a variety of reasons. Two Gachechiladze campaign officials spoke at length about protocols from several recent precinct election commission (PEC) meetings in the region that had never been signed as required. They had challenged the protocols in court, arguing that they suspected the PEC meetings had never taken place. Asked what advantage the National Movement could gain from the unsigned protocols, they could not answer, other than to suggest the National Movement could use such

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procedural irregularities as an excuse to invalidate the election if it went against them. (Note: We have elsewhere heard a more credible-sounding complaint that some early PEC meetings were called without informing opposition members, to deprive them of a say in the election of PEC officers.) The local head of Natelashvili's campaign, Samson Gugava, said the ruling party would know how people on the supplemental list -- those whose names were not on the initial rolls -- voted, and would decide whether to count their votes depending on whether they would help win the election. These theories grant the National Movement a kind of sinister omniscience that is not very credible.

15. (C) All the opposition parties complained at length about "dead souls" on the voters list. DEC Chairman Avtandil Osepaishvili agreed that there are many more names on the list than people residing in Kutaisi. He explained that the families of deceased people often failed to file documents to remove the names, many other Georgians are working abroad without documenting their absence, and the early elections had not given officials enough time to correct the list fully. Several opposition campaigns are spending considerable resources going house-to-house to try to check the list themselves, and in the process they discovered that some registered addresses do not even exist. None of the opposition representatives had specific evidence proving that the ruling party would use these extra names for vote fraud, although many repeated widespread rumors that local officials were printing fraudulent IDs in the names of the "dead souls," complete with pictures of National Movement activists who would use them to cast multiple votes. When we noted that recent changes to the Election Code putting opposition members on the PECs might deter this kind of abuse, some opposition representatives acknowledged that this helped, but others argued that the government would put so much pressure on even opposition PEC members that they would be unwilling to object to fraud.

16. (C) All opposition candidates mentioned reports that the National Movement had instructed its voters to take a digital

photo of their marked ballot with a cell phone, in the voting booth, so that they could later prove that they had voted for Saakashvili. In order to guarantee that it was in fact their ballot in the photo, these voters were reportedly told to include a bit of their hand, or a ring, in the shot. When we asked the National Movement's Tevdoradze about these allegations, he replied that it would be impossible to find enough cell phones for such a large number of voters in Kutaisi. Later, when we conducted an experiment by trying to photograph a piece of paper and a hand with a typical Georgian cell phone, we found it practically impossible to read anything written on the paper in the photo.

17. (C) We spoke with only one person in Kutaisi whose analysis of the election contained any degree of qualification, balance, or sense that the truth may not be all on one side or the other: International Society for Fair Election and Democracy (ISFED) Regional Coordinator Teona Gogoshvili. She said there were a few cases ISFED had identified as violations, including one in which an opposition supporter was pressured to resign as a tax inspector, and another in which an opposition member of PEC was threatened with business problems if she did not behave in a certain way. Gogoshvili said that when such cases got attention, higher-ups in the government often stepped in to protect the people who had been pressured, suggesting the cases may have been the result of "excessive zeal" by lower-ranking government supporters. Gogoshvili said that this is why ISFED is encouraging people to speak up if they are pressured, although she acknowledged that many are probably afraid to do so. She said ISFED meets regularly with the opposition campaigns, but added that most of their concerns are "not well-based or verified."

What About the Issues?

18. (C) Governor Bobokhidze predicted that Saakashvili would win over 60 percent of the vote in Kutaisi, and 70 percent in the outlying villages of the Imereti region. He said Saakashvili was running on a record of achievements, including reducing crime by defeating the "thieves-in-law" criminal network. He acknowledged that the government had made some mistakes, but expressed confidence that the public would not want to go back to the situation of 2003. (Note: Bobokhidze is himself a controversial figure, cited in our Human Rights Report for beating a journalist in 2005.) National Movement campaign chief Tevdoradze offered a similar analysis, saying the government had fulfilled its promises, including improving roads and strengthening the army and other basic elements of statehood, and was now focusing its

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campaign on the next step: solving social problems. Bobokhidze and Kutaisi Mayor Nugzar Shamugia highlighted the government's plan to make Kutaisi the next city targeted for tourism development, following Signaghi, by promoting construction of hotels and conference facilities. Bobokhidze said that because of Kutaisi's historical sites, it would be well-placed for such development once the government finished four-laning the main road from Tbilisi.

19. (C) Gachechiladze's campaign offered a very different view, saying Saakashvili's popularity in the region was near zero, and his only hope for support was scaring voters. Campaign officials said Gachechiladze's support was rising because his platform of constitutional reform -- including an end the presidency as it is currently known soon after Gachechiladze is elected to it -- was resonating with voters tired of the "cult of the leader." A succession of such leaders, they said, had brought no progress to Georgia since independence. Asked about Gachechiladze's economic message, they said he is not focusing much on economic issues because he does not want to give voters "false promises," as Saakashvili does.

Comment

¶10. (C) All parties described the election in purely black and white terms, but in fact many of the alleged violations are most likely the result of the imperfect realities of campaigning in a country where a democratic political process is still relatively new. All parties are conducting aggressive voter outreach, using door-to-door visits and phone calls, in some cases from friends and family members of targeted voters. In addition to canvassing for votes, these contacts are often also intended to gauge public opinion and to check the accuracy of the voters list. These efforts may be a legitimate part of campaigning (assuming the activists are honest about who they represent) but they are no doubt unpleasant for many voters, and it is quite likely that many instinctively fear that contacts from the ruling party contain an implicit threat of trouble if voters oppose them.

¶11. (C) Public opinion in Kutaisi is hard to gauge. There have been no clearly unbiased polls taken since the violence in November, and the parties' views of public opinion are wildly divergent. Kutaisi has not benefited from economic growth to the same extent as Tbilisi and Batumi, and has the feel of a city that has yet to recover from the economic dislocation at the time of the Soviet collapse. At the same time, the region has earned a reputation for being less politically active than Tbilisi and Batumi, despite Kutaisi being Georgia's second-largest city, and for dividing its votes more or less in line with the country as a whole. Even some opposition leaders told us they did not expect Kutaisi voters to play a visible or unusual role on January 5 or after.
TEFFT